

November 2015 – creating good health and safety habits



Defining and delivering great health and safety performance requires an awful lot of time, commitment, enthusiasm, leadership and perseverance. Leaders must set and consistently deliver the highest health and safety standards to ensure they practically demonstrate their commitment to the words they speak. Remember that everyone looks up to the 'boss' – the moment he allows his standards to drop will be remembered as the standard to achieve regardless of the words that are spoken!

Just think how much easier this process would be if the actions we need to deliver are implemented without thinking – ie they are good habits.

In *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg discusses a simple three-step process that all habits follow. This cycle is known as The Habit Loop and states that each habit consists of:

1. The Trigger – the event that starts the habit
2. The Routine – the behaviour that you perform (ie the habit)
3. The Reward – the benefit that is associated with the habit



Each phase of the habit process is important but without the trigger nothing will change. If we accept that our own human behaviour fits with the model of ABC (activator, behaviour, consequences), then making a behaviour habitual is going to require some activators and some consequences to be repeated in a predictable way.

Let's look at how a new habit can be triggered and relate these to health and safety in the workplace:

1. Time:

Habits based around the time of day are common and I'm sure we can all relate to some of these when we wake up in the morning for instance!!

Why not identify a day of the week where you ALWAYS have at least one safety conversation.

This doesn't prevent you having safety conversations on other days of the week but guarantees you are having those quality conversations about health and safety that really make a difference.

2. Location:

Location (or environment) can be a powerful driver of habits. Do you always do the same thing when you enter a room or always sit in the same seat in the cafe or on the train?

Wearing the correct PPE is a very basic habit that should already be well ingrained into your daily activities. Think about other habits that could be formed in the workplace (eg always asking for a safety briefing from the working party supervisor when approaching employees).

3. Preceding events:

Many habits can be a programmed response to an event or something that has happened previously in your life.

Intervening proactively before commencing work to ask the question "What could go wrong / how could I get hurt?" can help to change our mindset about potential consequences and alter our perception and the actions we take.

4. Emotional state:

It is recognised that emotional state can be a strong influence on bad habits (eg comfort snacking).

Demonstrating emotional intelligence about yourself and your colleagues' mental wellbeing can be vitally important from a health and safety perspective. If people are 'asleep at the wheel' and they have a safety critical role, reallocate responsibilities or 'take 5' to ensure complete focus on the task in-hand.

5. Other people:

The people you choose to associate with can play a role in your habits and behaviours.

Developing a culture where people choose to do the right thing, even when no-one is watching requires visible commitment from the leaders in the organisation but also the support from key influencers within the workforce. Identify these key influencers and work with them to demonstrate good habits and these actions will be demonstrated by others in the workforce.

Have a think about the appropriate trigger for a new habit to improve health and safety in your workplace or at home. Try to be specific so that the trigger is appropriate and implements an immediate action.

References: James Clear

The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.

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